

Disgraced

By Ayad Akhtar

Study Guide



Nicole Gabriella Scipione as Emily and Rajesh Bose as Mir in PlayMakers Repertory Company production *Disgraced*

Playwright



Ayad Akhtar's (*Playwright*) plays include *Disgraced* (LCT3/Lincoln Center Theater, 2013 Pulitzer Prize for Drama and 2013 Obie Award for Extraordinary Achievement), *The Who and The What* (LCT3/Lincoln Center Theater and La Jolla Playhouse), and *The Invisible Hand* (The Repertory Theater of St. Louis). Also a Novelist, Akhtar is the author of *American Dervish*, published in 20 languages worldwide. He co-wrote and starred in *The War Within* (Magnolia Pictures), which was released internationally and nominated for an Independent Spirit Award for Best Screenplay. As an actor, Akhtar also starred as Neel Kashkari in HBO's adaption of Andrew

Ross Sorkin's book *Too Big to Fail*. He studied at Brown University and Columbia University's School of the Arts.

Synopsis

Disgraced is the story of Amir, an American-born, Muslim-raised, Manhattan mergers and acquisition lawyer and his Caucasian wife, Emily, who host a dinner party at their Upper Eastside apartment. Emily is a painter whose work has been influenced by Islamic art. The story is told in four scenes. At the top of the play, Amir's assimilated nephew, Abe, also Pakistani-American, arrives at the apartment in the hopes of convincing his uncle to come to the aid of a local imam who has been imprisoned on charges of financing terrorist groups. Emily convinces her husband to appear in court to support the imam who Abe believes to be a victim of religious persecution. His appearance, which is reported in the New York Times, becomes a topic of dinner conversation when Amir and Emily host Jory, an African-American work colleague of Amir's, and her husband Isaac, a Jewish curator at the Whitney, at their home. Tensions mount, as polite dinner conversation turns into direct confrontations between the four over religion and race. The night becomes more heated when Amir discovers that Jory has been made partner at the law firm over him, supposedly due to the other partners' suspicions that Amir misled them when he was hired. Still fuming from the loss of his promotion, Amir discovers that Isaac and Emily had an affair while they were on a business trip. The dinner guests leave the apartment, and Amir brutally beats his wife - a terror that Abe is witness to as he is coming into his uncle's apartment uninvited. In the final scene, six months later, Amir is packing up the apartment which has been sold when the now estranged Emily shows up with Abe who is in need of legal advice. Abe and his radical friend Tariq have been stopped by the FBI as a result of their taunting a barista at Starbucks. It is clear that Abe's wide-eyed love of America has shifted to radical suspicion as he tells his uncle that he suspects the FBI is using him as bait to root out terrorist plots. When Amir tells Abe he needs to be smart and not make trouble with the FBI, Abe confronts his uncle on his lack of loyalty to his "people." With the final words of "They disgraced us. I will handle this myself," Abe storms out of the apartment. Emily admits to Amir that her art was selfishly naïve, a testament to her realization that his casting aside his Muslim heritage was a desperate survival mechanism, and she asks him not to contact her again. She leaves, and Amir stares gravely into the image of the portrait that Emily was painting at the beginning of the play.



Aasif Mandvi and Omar Maskati in *Disgraced* at Lincoln Center, New York

Director



Susan Booth (*Director*) Susan V. Booth joined the Alliance Theatre in 2001 and has initiated the Collision Project for teens, the Alliance/Kendeda National Graduate Playwriting Competition, created local producing partnerships and has overseen regional collaborative productions, as well as commercial partnerships on projects including *Ghost Brothers of Darkland County*; *The Color Purple*; *Bring It On: The Musical*; *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*; *Sister Act: The Musical*; *Bring in Da' Noise*, *Bring in Da' Funk*; and *Jesus Christ Superstar GOSPEL*. As a director, she has worked at theatres including the Goodman, La Jolla Playhouse, New York Stage and Film, Actors

Theatre of Louisville, Northlight Theatre, Victory Gardens, Court Theatre and many others. She holds degrees from Denison and Northwestern universities and was a fellow of the National Critics Institute and the Kemper Foundation. She has held teaching positions at Northwestern and DePaul universities, and serves as adjunct faculty with Emory University. She is the past president of the board of directors for Theatre Communications Group (the national service organization for the field) and is a trustee of Denison University and The Howard School.

Actors



ANDREW BENATOR (*Issac*) Alliance Theatre: *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*; *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark*; *Good People*; *August: Osage County*; *Eurydice*; *Tennis In Nablus*; *A Christmas Carol*. Atlanta: *RACE* (True Colors Theatre); *Seminar*, *Becky Shaw* (Actor's Express); *Freud's Last Session* (Theatrical Outfit); *The Tempest* (Georgia Shakespeare); *Boeing, Boeing* (Aurora Theatre); *The Ladies Man* (Theater in the Square). Off-Broadway: *Things You Shouldn't Say Past Midnight*, *Valparaiso*, *Flu Season*. Regional: Hartford TheaterWorks, Pittsburgh Public Theater, Sacramento's B St. Theater, San Jose Rep, San Francisco's Magic Theater. Film & TV: "Powers," "Stranger Things," "Red Band Society," "Being Mary Jane," "Burn Notice," "House of Payne," "Meet the Browns," *The Founder*, *Confirmation*, *Last of Robin Hood*, *Million Dollar Arm*, *Quarantine 2*, *Game Six*, *The Good Student*, *Almanac*. andrewbenator.com



Jaspal Bining (*Amir*) is thrilled to be making his Alliance Theatre debut in Ayad Akhtar's Pulitzer-Prize winning play *Disgraced*. He recently appeared in a workshop of *An Ordinary Man* at New York's Signature Theatre (directed by Pulitzer-Prize winning playwright Tony Kushner). Jaspal starred as 'Adam' in the Drama Desk Award winning *The Mysteries* (The Flea Theater) as well as in Thomas Bradshaw's *Job* (The Flea Theater), *Otherland* opposite Condola Rashad, (The Pearl Theater) and *The Shaking Earth* (NYTW at Dartmouth). Upcoming films include *Ovum* and *Occupy*

Me. He made his television debut in HBO's "The Newsroom," will be seen in "Doomsday," and as a regular in the new series "Brown Nation." He recently completed filming the lead role in an episode of the A+E hit series "I Love You... But I Lied." Jaspal would like to thank the cast, crew, staff, director and

the Alliance for this amazing opportunity, Davis Spylios Mgmt. and his guardian angel ABC's Marci Phillips.



Tinashe Kajese (Jory) Tinashe is excited to be working at the Alliance Theatre and was most recently seen in the True Color's production of *Detroit '67*. Originally from Zimbabwe and a new resident of Atlanta, she was in the West Coast premieres of *Stick Fly* (Ovation Award & NAACP Winner "Best Ensemble") and Athol Fugard's *Victory*, Fountain Theater, (LA Weekly Award Best Lead Actress, Maddy Award Winner, Best of L.A Times). Broadway: *Coram Boy*; Off-Broadway: *Bulrushers*; *In The Continuum*; *The Safety Net*; *The God Botherers*; *Richard III*; *Macbeth*; *Angela's Mixed Tape*. Regional: Yale Rep, Center Theatre Group, Woolly Mammoth, Cincinnati Playhouse, Geva Theatre, Hangar Theatre, Shakespeare Festival of St. Louis, Skirball Cultural Center among others. TV/Film: *Enlightened* (HBO), *Cold Case* (CBS); *Semi-Dead* (Web Series), *Day Zero* (feature); *Superstore: Transcendental Function*; and several national commercials. Thanks to God, and love to Keith, Kingston, and my wonderful family for your support!



Courtney Patterson (Emily) returns to the Alliance after appearing several productions including *The Geller Girls*; *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark*; *August: Osage County*; *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* She has appeared on various stages around the city including Georgia Shakespeare, Theatrical Outfit, Aurora Theatre, and Synchronicity Performance Group. TV/Film: "Stuff You Should Know," "Drop Dead Diva," "Good Eats," *Anchorman 2*, *Let's Be Cops*. Much love to Nick, Javier, Susan, Mom and Dad. www.courtneypatterson.net



Ali Sohaili (Abe) is excited to be making his Alliance debut. New York credits: *Sex of the Baby* (Access Theater). Film: *Odyssea* (Slamdance Film Festival). Ali is a recent graduate of the Juilliard School (group 42). Juilliard credits include *Pericles*, *Cripple of Inishmaan*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *McReele*.

Characters

Amir – of South Asian origin. A corporate lawyer at odds with his Muslim heritage. Emily's husband

Emily – Caucasian. A painter whose work focuses on the spiritual roots of the Muslim faith. She strives to be even-handed and level-headed in both her personal and professional relationships. On the verge of a major breakthrough, she finds herself and her marriage increasingly threatened by her husband's complicated relationship to his Islamic roots and faith.

Isaac – Caucasian. Jewish. A successful art curator married to Jory. A vibrant and seductive personality, he draws people in with his charmingly quick wit, easy manner and passion.

Jory – African American. Recently made partner in Amir's firm. Married to Isaac. Very forthright and sharp. An articulate and confident woman who has wrestled her way to the top.

Abe – Pakistani American. Amir's nephew. As mainstream American as they come. Becoming somewhat of a young Muslim activist in his community. He is passionate, headstrong, and devout in his beliefs. He loves his uncle and seeks his approval, while at the same time, the two of them are at idealistic odds regarding the Muslim faith.

Unfamiliar Words and Phrases from *Disgraced*

Taqiyya - an Islamic doctrine that allows Muslims to deceive non-Muslims

Mergers and Acquisitions – the combination of a commercial company, institution, etc., with another; or the consolidation of two or more companies into one.

Public Defender – A lawyer or staff of lawyers employed by the government to represent in a criminal action a defendant unable to afford legal assistance

Imam (E-MAM) – As used in the Koran, Imam means leader, symbol, model, ideal, example, revelation, and guide. Historically, the term refers to the religio-political leader of the Muslim community, but for various sectarian and historical reasons the term has been interpreted and applied in different ways throughout Islamic history and into the modern period.

Patriot Act - This 2001 Act of U.S. Congress, a response to the terrorist attacks of September 11th, dramatically increased law enforcement agencies' abilities to search telephone, e-mail communications, medical, financial, and other records; eased restrictions on foreign intelligence gathering within the United States; expanded the Secretary of the Treasury's authority to regulate financial transactions, particularly those involving foreign individuals and entities; and broadened the freedom of law enforcement and immigration authorities in detaining and deporting immigrants suspected of terrorism-related acts.

Ibn Arabi - Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi is a spiritual teacher. His work is rooted in the Quran and focuses on the belief that each person has a unique path to the truth, which unites all paths in itself.

Mulla Sadra - An Iranian Islamic philosopher who led the Iranian cultural renaissance in the 17th century.

Matisse - Henri Matisse was a French artist who later in life frequently chose oriental topics for his paintings.

Insurance Arbitration - The settlement of a dispute or question at issue by one to whom the conflicting parties agree to refer their claims in order to obtain an equitable decision.

Macallan - One of the world's most expensive and coveted single-malt scotch whiskeys. Sotheby's once auctioned off a \$460,000 bottle of WWII Macallan scotch.

"On The Rocks" - Pouring an alcoholic beverage over ice.

"Neat" - Pouring an alcoholic beverage in a glass at room temperature with no ice.

Port - A sweet wine, most often consumed after dinner with desert.

Sublime - Of things in nature and art: Affecting the mind with a sense of overwhelming grandeur or irresistible power; calculated to inspire awe, deep reverence, or lofty emotion, by reason of its beauty, vastness, or grandeur.

Moor - Originally: a native or inhabitant of ancient Mauretania, a region of North Africa corresponding to parts of present-day Morocco and Algeria. Later commonly: a member of a Muslim people of mixed Berber and Arab descent inhabiting north-western Africa (now mainly present-day Mauritania), who in the 8th century conquered Spain.

Pathos - A quality which evokes pity, sadness, or tenderness; the power of exciting pity; affecting character or influence.

Thread Count - The number of threads woven together in a square inch. The higher the thread count, the softer and more expensive the fabric.

Charvet - A highly expensive men's wear brand. Typical Charvet shirts cost anywhere from \$400 to \$600.

Sothi Sikander - Fictional artist.

Rumi - Prolific 13th century Persian poet, jurist, theologian, and mystic. His highly spiritual works have been translated into many languages.

Hanif Saeed (HAWN-IF SIE–EED) - Fictional character.

Talmud - A central text of mainstream Judaism. It takes the form of a record of rabbinic discussions pertaining to Jewish law, ethics, philosophy, customs and history.

Islamofascism - The advocacy or practice of a form of Islam perceived as authoritarian, intolerant, or extremist; specifically Islamic fundamentalism is regarded in this way.

Martin Amis (AH-ME) - British Novelist whose particularly radical views on the Islamic world have gone under heavy fire.

Henry Kissinger - American Secretary of State from 1973 to 1977 under Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford. He pioneered several controversial foreign policies during his tenure, including the detente with the Soviet Union and the bombing of Cambodia.

Chorizo - A type of pork sausage.

Paella - A Valencian rice dish.

Mahmoud Ahmadinajad - The sixth and current president of the Islamic Republic of Iran. He is criticized in the West for being anti-Semitic and pro-Palestinian in his opinions of Israel.

Fundamentalism - As pertains to religion: a similarly strict adherence to ancient or fundamental doctrines, with no concessions to modern developments in thought or customs.

Netanyahu - Benjamin Netanyahu is an Israeli politician and the current Prime Minister of Israel.

Mujahideen - Term used by Muslims to describe Muslims who struggle in the path of Allah. Recently, this term has been closely associated with radical Islamic militant groups.

Al-Qaeda - Militant Islamist organization founded by Osama bin Laden. Its origins are traceable to the Soviet war in Afghanistan.

Jihad - A term referring to struggle against those who do not believe in Allah.

Goldman Sachs - A leading global investment banking, securities and management firm.

Orientalism - A term used for the imitation or depiction of Eastern cultures by writers and other artists from the West.

London Frieze Art Fair - One of the world's leading contemporary art fairs that takes place each October in Regent's Park.

Shiva – Hindu god; the destroyer

Velázquez's "Portrait of Juan de Pareja." - a painting by Spanish artist Diego Velázquez, dating from around 1650 and currently on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.



Quran - the Islamic sacred book, believed by Muslims to be the word of God as dictated to Muhammad by the archangel Gabriel and written down in Arabic.

Hamas - Hamas is a Palestinian Islamic organization, with an associated military wing

Bigot - a person who is intolerant toward those holding different opinions

Cordoba - a city located in the geographical center of Argentina

“Moghul miniatures” – Moghul paintings are a particular style of South Asian painting, generally confined to miniatures either as book illustrations or as single works to be kept in albums, which emerged from Persian miniature painting, with Indian Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist influences, and developed largely in the court of the Mughal Empire.

“The Whitney” – The Whitney Museum of American Art; located in New York City, New York

Van Gogh - Vincent Willem van Gogh was a post-Impressionist painter. A Dutch artist whose work had a far-reaching influence on 20th-century art.

“Constables at the Tate” - John Constable, RA was an English Romantic painter who lived between 1776 and 1837. Tate Gallery is a family of four art galleries in London, Liverpool and Cornwall. Constable’s work is at the London gallery.



Staten Island - one of the five boroughs of New York City, in the U.S. state of New York

Lower Manhattan - the southernmost part of the island of Manhattan, the main island and center of business and government of the City of New York

“Jerry” – Jerry Saltz has been an American art critic and senior art critic/columnist for New York magazine since 2006

“late Bonnard” – Pierre Bonnard was a twentieth-century French painter. He preferred to work from memory, and his paintings often had a dream like quality to them. He was a founding member of the avant-garde group, Les Nabis.

“Victoria & Albert. Room 42” – Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Room 42 is dedicated to Islamic Art

Mimimalism - a trend in sculpture and painting that arose in the 1950s and used simple, typically massive, forms.

Bodega - a small grocery store, especially in a Spanish-speaking neighborhood.

La Tur - a dense, creamy blend of pasteurized cow, goat and sheep milk

Knicks - The New York Knickerbockers, commonly referred to as the Knicks, are an American professional basketball team based in New York City

Cubs - The Chicago Cubs are an American professional baseball team located on the North Side of Chicago, Illinois.

WASP – White Anglo Saxon Protestant; an informal, sometimes disparaging term for a group of high-status and influential White Americans of English Protestant ancestry

Denial of Death - is a 1973 work of psychology and philosophy by Ernest Becker. It was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for General Non-Fiction in 1974, two months after the author's death.

Annie Hall – Woody Allen movie in which comedian Alvy Singer (Woody Allen) examines the rise and fall of his relationship with struggling nightclub singer Annie Hall (Diane Keaton).

Anderson Cooper 360 – News show; the anchorman brings his prickly but often witty perspective to current events and personalities in the news

Mazel Tov - a Jewish phrase expressing congratulations or wishing someone good luck

Landscapes - the depiction in art of landscapes – natural scenery such as mountains, valleys, trees, rivers, and forests, especially where the main subject is a wide view – with its elements arranged into a coherent composition.

Michele Bachmann - an American politician. A Republican, she is a former member of the United States House of Representatives, who represented Minnesota's 6th congressional district, a post she held from 2007 to 2015.

Racial Profiling - the use of race or ethnicity as grounds for suspecting someone of having committed an offense.

Idiosyncrasies - a mode of behavior or way of thought peculiar to an individual.

Christopher Hitchens - an English author, religious and literary critic, orator and journalist. Hitchens later spent much of his career in the United States and became an American citizen in 2007.

Fulbright in Seville - The Fulbright Program, including the Fulbright-Hays Program, is a program of competitive, merit-based grants for international educational exchange for students, scholars, teachers, professionals, scientists and artists, founded by United States Senator J. William Fulbright in 1946.

“Ran with the bulls in Pamplona” – The Running of the Bulls is a practice that involves running in front of a small group of cattle, typically six, of the *toro bravo* breed that have been let loose on a course of a sectioned-off subset of a town's streets. The most famous running of the bulls is the eight-day festival of Sanfermines in honour of Saint Fermin in Pamplona

Joseph Smith and Mormonism - Joseph Smith, the founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, commonly known as the Mormons, claimed to be a prophet of God.

South Park - an animated series that follows the adventures of Stan, Kyle, Kenny, and Cartman. The writers satirize political issues, religious organizations, famous people, etc.

The veil - also called Hijab is a head covering worn in public by some Muslim women

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad - an Iranian politician who was the sixth President of Iran from 2005 to 2013. He was also the main political leader of the Alliance of Builders of Islamic Iran, a coalition of conservative political groups in the country.

“Confidentiality” – a confidentiality agreement is a legally binding contract in which a person or business promises to treat specific information as a trade secret and promises not to disclose the secret to others without proper authorization.

Kufi Hats – a brimless, short and rounded cap that Muslim men wear

CIA – (Central Intelligence Agency) a civilian foreign intelligence service of the U.S. Government, tasked with gathering, processing and analyzing national security information from around the world, primarily through the use of human intelligence

Mujahideen - guerrilla fighters in Islamic countries, especially those who are fighting against non-Muslim forces.

Ghetto – a term originally used to describe a part of the city of Venice to which the Jewish community was segregated. This term now refers to a section of a city where because of economic and social pressure, a minority group lives.

A Brief History of the Partition of Palestine

Towards the end of the 19th century, Palestine (then defined as the geographic region between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River) was inhabited mostly by Arab Muslims. At that time most of the Jewish population worldwide lived outside Palestine. There was a Jewish aspiration to return to Zion, the historic land of Israel, gather the exiles, and liberate the Jews from the anti-Semitic discrimination and persecution that occurred in their Diaspora. This was called the Zionist movement and it called for the establishment of a nation state for the Jewish people in Palestine. As a result of the extent of the Zionist enterprises that arose, the Arab population in the Palestinian region began protesting against the acquisition of lands by the Jewish population, resulting in the then Ottoman Empire banning land sales to foreigners. When the Ottoman Empire joined the Central Powers in WWI, Britain's communications with India were threatened, and it became an aim of the British strategies to conquer Palestine. The British defeated Ottoman Turkish forces in 1917 and occupied Ottoman Syria. The British Mandate for Palestine was a legal commission, administering the Ottoman Empire into two parts- Palestine (to include a national home for the Jewish people, under British rule) and Transjordan (under the rule of the Hashemite family). In 1947, the United Nations proposed a resolution entitled The Partition of Palestine, which divided Palestine into two states, one Jewish, one Arab, with the UN protecting the Jerusalem-Bethlehem area.

An Interview With Ayad Akhtar

"Notes for the Stage"

Aditi Sriram

Guernica Magazine

June 2, 2014

Standing over the stove in a baseball hat and sweatpants, the writer Ayad Akhtar is making chai. It's the perfect antidote to a misty gray afternoon in solitary central Harlem. Chai is volatile—boiling liquids, agitated tea leaves, stinging spices—but also reassuring, always finally settling into a deep brown. It is a blend of tradition and intuition, mood stirred together with habit. And it tastes different every time.

Akhtar's tea is strong and sweet. More impressively, it retains its heat for the hour that we discuss his writing, prizes, and current projects. Akhtar began his career in acting and screenwriting, but his debut novel, *American Dervish* (Little, Brown, 2012), turned swaths of post-9/11 American readers on to the pre-9/11 Muslim-American experience. Its narrator, the sensitive, ten-year-old Hayat, tells of his childhood curiosities, in particular the allure of Islam, which he gleans from the mystical stories his beloved aunt tells him each night.

In his play *Disgraced*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 2013, Akhtar's protagonist is Amir, a South Asian-American corporate lawyer who has long rejected youthful notions of tradition, religion, and even ethnicity. The play's five main characters are as distinct as cardamom pods from cloves; thrown into a pot on New York's Upper East Side, they dance and hiss their opinions. Akhtar, who loves drama because it can be experienced in the body, insists that the play he spent four years writing came to life only when it did for the three hundred strangers sitting in the audience with him. "That's the beauty and disappointment of the theater," he says.

It is a big year for Akhtar. His latest dramatic production, *The Who & the What*, began previews at Lincoln Center Theater this past Saturday, and its questions—about faith, identity, contemporary America, the possibility of bridging the divide between one's heritage and modern life—echo those posed in *Disgraced*. The New York Theater Workshop, whose mission is to promote "aesthetically, thematically, and methodologically diverse" productions, will be showcasing another of his works, *The Invisible Hand*, along with three other plays. It goes up in November, and is the centerpiece of the company's recently announced 2014/15 season.

It was a rainy Friday afternoon in mid-April when Akhtar and I met at his book-lined apartment, which sits one floor above his office, in Manhattan's Hamilton Heights. Akhtar believes his work is "reflective of a kid brought up on TV who spent all of college reading Ibsen and Beckett and Shakespeare." And he gives his characters the same diversity of thought and experience.

—Aditi Sriram for Guernica

Guernica: You are described in various interviews as an actor, screenwriter, author, and playwright. How do you see yourself and the work you do?

Ayad Akhtar: I think of myself as a narrative artist. I don't think of myself as a novelist or screenwriter or playwright. All of those modalities of processing and experiencing narrative are obviously very different, and I'm not sure that I prefer any one to the other. I think the novel gives you the opportunity to have a kind of interiority that you can't have in the theater, which is pure exteriority. That pure exteriority, paradoxically, creates a much more heightened interiority for the audience. So if you want to really

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deeply touch the viewer or the reader, the theater might be the most powerful way to do it. When it's done right, obviously. When it's not done right it's really boring.

I've had very powerful experiences in movies, but seminal experiences in the theater and as a reader of great novels are the things that have marked me most.

Guernica: You've described your play *Disgraced* as "deeply American." Would you use that same phrase to describe your upbringing in Milwaukee? You were raised in a secular home, yes?

Ayad Akhtar: Basically. My mom is devotional in a sort of traditional, South Asian pre-Zia Ul Haq [the president of Pakistan from 1978 to 1988] way, before Islam became this big thing in Pakistan. [Islam] changed a lot, and became a much more politically and socially visible phenomenon in terms of its performance after Zia. So my parents' generation was not particularly interested in religion per se as an identity marker. They tried to be more like the West. My mom grew up loving Elvis Presley and reading Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald. She had a poster of Johnny Cash on her wall. She was educated by convent nuns. It was a completely different orientation. And my dad has always been particularly uninterested in matters of faith.

Guernica: As a kid, were a lot of your friends churchgoing? Did religion come up?

Ayad Akhtar: It did. I've always felt a connection to kids who go to church. I think I'm fundamentally a religiously oriented and religiously minded person. It's very easy for me to communicate with people who have that same grounding, that same vocabulary or modality of thinking and expressing themselves. I wouldn't say that I got interested in Christianity, but I certainly was interested in what they said about their experiences and their faith. My exposure to it as a kid in Milwaukee meant that I found a personal meaning in a lot of it, and in the American tradition of people—Jonathan Edwards, Emerson, Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich—who've been thinking about Christianity in very interesting ways.

Guernica: What about Judaism?

Ayad Akhtar: My relationship to Jewish artists and writers began when I was very young. It started with Chaim Potok, and in college I discovered Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, Woody Allen, Seinfeld. All of that stuff was hugely influential in helping me think about my experience. There seemed to be so many commonalities; I found myself and my community in those works, oddly.

I think there is a lot of continuity between the Jewish and the Islamic traditions. We know this historically, though people don't want to talk about that—especially Muslims. There is a common source for both Judaism and Islam, or let's say that Islam finds its source in Judaism. The commonalities of practice and sensibility, ethos and mythos, create a lot of overlap.

Growing up, the only part of my identity that mattered was being Muslim, and I knew that. Being Pakistani was not as important as being Muslim.

Post-9/11, the notion of “Muslims” taking on a potential truculence [corresponds to]—although it’s different—ways in which Jews were seen pejoratively within dominant Western cultures. Something about the orientation of faith being your identity marker as opposed to nationality or ethnicity. Post-9/11, that is an issue: folks get labeled “Muslim” no matter where they’re from. If you are Muslim, then that is part of it, but here’s the complicating factor for me: growing up, the only part of my identity that mattered was being Muslim, and I knew that. Being Pakistani was not as important as being Muslim. So the black guy whom I met who’s a Muslim, I’m much closer to him than the Christian Pakistani guy who is my dad’s friend. We have a closer bond. This was innate to me as a kid.

I don’t know what it’s like to be Jewish, but I suspect there is some aspect of that: being Jewish is the thing that bonds you as opposed to being Jewish from Poland, or Jewish from Hungary.

Guernica: But both *Disgraced* and your book *American Dervish* show a very bitter antagonism between the two faiths.

Ayad Akhtar: I think *American Dervish* is much more about the confrontation and confluences between Jewish and Islamic stuff, and I think *Disgraced* is much more about the political dimension: the way that the Muslim *Ummah*, or consciousness, has framed the Jewish question post-Israel. So there is an overlap, but also a huge difference, in the two works.

I want to write a sequel to *American Dervish* that will go much deeper into all of this—less the political and more the spiritual, the religio-historical. I imagine Hayat working with a Kabbalistic master in the sequel, somebody who brings him back to Islam. Oddly, he has to find a Jewish master to bring him back to his own faith.

This is the interweave: you can’t even think about the Prophet without thinking about the Prophet as a literary meditation on Jewish tropes of prophetology.

The Quran is many different things, and we also have to see the Quran almost as a secondary source commenting on the Old Testament. I was just reading about Moses in both Exodus and Genesis, and in the Quran. There’s a precision with which the Quran is quoting the Old Testament, but also transforming certain details: Moses not hiding his arm in his armpit to show a leper’s arm, but a healed arm. The Quran *heals* Moses’s arm, whereas the Old Testament is very happy to use that sign in the opposite way. There’s such a tight-knit connection between the two texts.

John Wansbrough went through the Quran and demonstrated borrowings at the level of locution from Judaic texts. And so, again, we know that that was part of pre-Islamic Arabia. Part of the mythology of the Prophet pre-visitation by Gabriel for the first time is his exposure to Christian holy men and Jewish holy men.

Guernica: What do you make of the American preoccupation with memoir and the autobiography? Novelists will write a book in the first person and many readers will think, “That has to have happened to them in real life.”

Ayad Akhtar: Especially if you’re a writer of color or if you’re a woman. Because if you fall into either of those categories, you’re expected to be writing of your experience. But if you’re not, then you can write about anything.

It's always perplexing to me, the ways in which my own autobiography has found its way into my work. And it's often very misleading. I'll take details, and they are working in the opposite way from which they existed in my life. The story begins to have its own demands: I need this, that, and the other, and I could use this thing, but I have to change it. And so that comes into the story, and it has the register of authentic life, and people think, of course, it must have happened exactly like that.

They're going to get confused if they keep reading what I'm working on. They'll think, "How can he be that *and* that? It doesn't make any sense!"

Guernica: But *Disgraced* did arise out of an actual dinner party that took place. You saw the potential in that experience.

Ayad Akhtar: What I saw, subtly, was the way in which folks' idea of me, even people who knew me very well, changed because I articulated certain things about my experience of being Muslim. And that struck me as an inherently powerful vehicle, or idea, for a story. About three years passed between that dinner party and me even having the thought that I could write it as a play. And when I went back to do that, I had this thought process: OK, here are these characters, and a dinner party, and I remember what we talked about, but I can't have them talk about those things, so what happens if we just put these things into motion? A very early draft of the play was much more talky, and not as driven by back story, by onstage needs, things that people want from one another. That was something that began to evolve over a very long process.

I'd say for the first two and a half years I didn't know what the play was about. I was just writing, and Amir would keep talking.

I finished writing *Disgraced* at the beginning of 2009 and it had its first production in 2012, three years later, and I continued to rewrite it through London [in 2013]. So it was basically four years of really, really writing, constantly writing. And I'd say for the first two and a half years I didn't know what the play was about. I was just writing, and Amir would keep talking, and I would keep trying to understand what in god's name he was saying. And it was so strong, and it just kept going, and then I finally got it. But it really took me a whole production to understand that.

Guernica: It must have been helpful to have a character yelling at you as you wrote your way into the story. Can you talk more about the workshopping process?

Ayad Akhtar: I've been in the theater for most of my life, I just had never written a play. I've written a lot of screenplays, long-form fiction. After I finished *Disgraced*, I actually wrote three other plays back to back, so in eight months, I wrote four plays. And *then* I had the first reading of *Disgraced*. The work that's now coming out all comes from that time, and has all been through workshop, and first production, and I did huge rewrites before we went to Lincoln Center.

I'm still coming to understand my own process as a dramatic writer. But the thing I'm discovering is that there's no substitute for it being on its feet. I could not have imagined the quantum shift in perspective

that happens when I'm experiencing the work as embodied by a group of actors, as opposed to imagining it on the screen, on the page. [Seeing it is understanding] its capacity for impact, and understanding what impact means, what action is.

I experience that story for the first time when the audience does. Up until then, it's just notes toward a story.

Guernica: What happens when you see your play come alive, the characters moving and speaking?

Ayad Akhtar: I have the experience in my body. My body experiences the work for the first time, and I know when something's missing. I'm like, "Where's this—why did that end there? Oh, because I ended it there!" I feel the audience's trajectory. And I'm a very traditional storyteller, it's not like the audience is having radically different experiences of the narrative. They're having one experience, which they like or don't like, or have conflicted feelings about. They're experiencing a thing, which is a story, and I experience that story for the first time when they do. Up until then, it's just notes toward a story. That's the quantum shift that happens for me.

And it's wonderful—my god, it is so wonderful. It's also nerve-wracking: I don't really know what I've done, and the first time I'm going to know what I've done is when three hundred people are sitting in the audience watching it with me. "Oh, *that's* what that is...*that's* what the story is... I thought the story was this other thing." It's a beautiful process.

Guernica: *American Dervish* ends with "Reading Guide Questions," and *Disgraced* includes your essay "On Reading Plays," as well as an interview about the play at the end. Do you think these contribute to a better understanding of your work?

Ayad Akhtar: Here's the problem: we are living in a time when the act of reading is changing. The nature of a reader's attention is changing. The capacity for deep literary engagement is changing. I don't believe that that is a harbinger for a less profound experience with a viewer or a reader, but it means that the terms of that interaction are changing. Enormous prima facie demands on a reader are going to limit, in today's day and age, their capacity to engage in a multivalent conversation with a work. Folks are not even reading articles on the Internet anymore: you read two sentences, you scan the rest for some opinion or some nugget, and you move on to something else.

I think that the thematic, formal history of the literary form ultimately harkens back to a different political system. That is to say, a feudal order: the aristocratic dispensation of leisure time, the refinements of the self. With the shift from feudal aristocracy to democracy there has been a long process of evolution. I think we're in the throes of a kind of steep, logarithmic shift, and I think that literary forms are losing their capacity to connect people to issues, to the experiences that feel most meaningful to them.

I had a readership, because of *American Dervish*, that I suspected might be interested in *Disgraced*, but I suspected might also not be in the habit of reading plays. And so I wanted to offer some way of

conceiving how that experience was going to be different, and what to pay attention to in the process of reading. And then at the end of the play, everyone is always asking me, "What does the play mean?" so I thought, let me offer an interview that talks around what it means, without answering the question, and opens up the possibility for folks to have that conversation on their own.

Guernica: Given the guides in your books, do you have a specific person in mind when you write?

Ayad Akhtar: No. I've suffered a lot in this business, working as an artist in America. One of the things that I have learned, one of the attainments of the long travails and tribulations, has been, I think, coming to a simpler sense of myself that I think correlates to a simpler sense of others. Something closer to what I now call the simple sense of being human, a sort of Wallace Stevens-esque formulation. I know that I can reach this in the audience, because when they start hearing a story, they wake up in this very clear, simple way. Almost like children. It's the same thing: a child asks, "What's going to happen next?" When they sense that a story is being told to them, they wake up. When they sense that it's not being told anymore, they lose interest. I take this very seriously, because the sacred trust that allows openness is the precondition of the kind of exchange I want to have, the kind of relationship that I want to have. I don't want to test that simple sense of being human. I don't want to transform it.

Arriving at an innate appreciation and capacity to recognize that has been the attainment of my life. I have no interest in problematizing things. So what I am writing to is that simple sense of being human in myself. And if I do that, I *know* that I'm going to do it with others, because it's the same thing: I have it; you have it, everybody in the audience, all the readers, have it. Is everybody going to appreciate it? Maybe not. But that's what I write to. I don't have an ideal reader. I'm trying to reach something simple and, I believe, universal, in every single person.

***Disgraced* in the Classroom**

Pre-Show Questions

1. What is the difference between individual and systematic racism? Which do you believe is harder to overcome?
2. Which do you value more: personal freedom or national safety? Why?
3. Should your religion be a factor in whether or not you are hired in certain jobs? Why or why not? Which jobs?
4. Is there a difference between cultural appropriation and inspiration? How can you differentiate between the two? Is cultural appropriation always wrong?

Post-Show Questions

1. In *Disgraced*, Emily was inspired by Velázquez's "Portrait of Juan de Pareja." Have you ever been inspired by a work of art? What was the result?
2. Amir insisted that he should not assist Abe's friend, Imam Fareed. Emily and Abe insisted he should. Which do you believe is the right choice? Defend your position with textual support.
3. What do you believe was the main factor in Amir losing his promotion to partner? Could he have done anything differently to ensure his promotion?
4. In the play, both Amir and Abe change their names. Do you believe this was necessary for them to be successful in life? Is it dishonest for them to change their names? According to The National Bureau of Economic Research, "Job applicants with white names needed to send about 10 resumes to get one callback; those with [ethnic sounding] names needed to send around 15 resumes to get one callback." Does this statistic impact your opinion at all?
(<http://www.nber.org/digest/sep03/w9873.html>)
5. Was Emily participating in cultural appropriation by painting works using Islamic forms? Defend your position.

Creative Writing Prompts

1. Write the conversation Amir and Jory have off-stage when they leave to pick up champagne.
2. Have you ever felt like you suffered an injustice? What was it? How did you remedy the situation?
3. If you were Ayad Akhtar, how would you have ended *Disgraced*? Make sure that the characters are true to who they are.
4. Compare and contrast Shakespeare's *Othello* and Akhtar's *Disgraced*.

Articles Relevant to Discussions about *Disgraced*

“Employers’ Replies to Racial Names”

<http://www.nber.org/digest/sep03/w9873.html>

“The Dos and Don’ts of Cultural Appropriation”

<http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/10/the-dos-and-donts-of-cultural-appropriation/411292/#article-comments>

“Is Cultural Appropriation Always Wrong?”

http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/04/magazine/is-cultural-appropriation-always-wrong.html?_r=0

“Velazquez and the Soul of Juan de Pareja”

<http://blogcritics.org/velzquez-and-the-soul-of-juan/>